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THE GREEK ATTITUDE TOWARD ATHLETICS, AND PINDAR.

I.

THE revival of athletic sports in America, and indeed throughout the world, does not even yet make intelligible to us the intimate relation of such contests to Greek social life, politics, and religion. Yet the enthusiastic veneration shown by our college boys for the master athlete and prize winner is at least a partial key to the riddle.

The Greeks were intense lovers of life, of healthy, vigorous youth and its pleasures. We, especially the Puritan strain of Anglo-Saxon stock, are a less joyous, perhaps a more contemplative people. Hebraic teachings, and mediæval asceticism, have bidden us regard this life as a painful, dangerous transition to one infinitely more important. The mortification of the flesh, the sinfulness of pleasure, had never been preached to the folk of early Hellas. It must be conceded, too, that their ethical nature was less prominent than their imaginative and intellectual activity. Like our boys, again, they might be thoughtlessly brutal, though not often consciously cruel.

As to the divine natures, the early Hellenes certainly had no lofty revelation. Their gods craved what men desired, and seized it with longer arms, with more insatiate thirst. To such men, and such gods, manly strife was of all things most acceptable. The victor had fairly won the prize and glory; the loser, if he saved his life, must slink homeward with scant sympathy, indeed thankful to be ignored.

The Greeks loved wealth, with the luxury and the power it brings. Therein they were merely human. But they also craved, with a more than Gallic eagerness, lasting personal distinction. They never dreamed of such reward as "Nirvana," of oblivion, of absorption into the oversoul. Heracles, their chief athlete, was immortal on the masculine side. He

won a seat in the Olympian council hall, wedlock with Hebe (Youth), eternal fame, and doubtless often sighed for foes worthy of his human thews and sinews, from which his reluctant spirit had parted on the funeral pyre. Hence a double or astral body of his appears also in the Homeric underworld—a world which was but the pallid renewal of earthly conditions and employments.

The twenty-third book is at least a very early supplement to an earlier *Iliad*. It is by comparison very mature and intensely thoughtful in tone. In the midnight converse with Patroclus's ghost the youth time of Achilles passes him by. The future yawns before him:

Art thou asleep, and wert thou forgetful of me, O Achilles,
Now that I am dead, who in life was never neglectful?
Bury me now in haste, that I pass by the portal of Hades.
Now am I banished afar by the souls, the ghosts of the perished,
They forbid me beyond the river among them to mingle.

Never may I return, when of fire my need thou accordedst.
Never as living men may we sit, apart from our comrades,
Weaving our counsel: for me hath yawned that destiny grievous,
Which at the very hour of my birth for me was appointed.
Even for you, O Achilles, like to the gods, it is fated,
Here to meet your death, by the wall of the valorous Trojans. . . .

And yet the funeral rites which fill nearly all the rest of this book are athletic contests, held in honor of the dead chieftain. These games include chariot races, though not the later contest of saddle horses, so important at Olympia. Horseback-riding was known to the Homeric men only as a rare acrobatic feat. The mourning Achilles stanches his tears to become chief umpire and dispenser of prizes.

Other nations, even, were imagined as much the same in their ideas. Hector was undoubtedly buried with similar rites. Certainly the Trojan legend itself was full of such contests, and over Anchises's Sicilian tomb even Roman Virgil ordains an elaborate imitation of Achilles's games. So when the wayworn Odysseus is entertained in the Phæacian land, the Prince Laodamas, in the midst of the sports, says to the unknown guest:

Come thou, stranger, my father, do thou too try in the contests:
If thou art skilled in any: one should be with contests familiar,
Since, whoever he be, for a hero no glory is greater
Than whatever with hands, or, again, with his feet, he accomplish!

Laodamas's bad manners are fittingly reproved, but the sentiment is not questioned, and the challenge, on its sharper repetition, is accepted with vigor and brilliant success. The hero who pitches a heavy discus far beyond all the records is quite the same man who, a few days later, alone can bend his mighty bow, and does to death the lawless suitors of his wife. The Homeric Greeks, and those of historical times, felt that athletic competition, like hunting—in which also Odysseus had distinguished himself—made the best preparation for “man-ennobling battle,” of all games the most glorious. The doctrine is heard again to-day, from the highest seat in the land. It is a part of the theory of the strenuous life. For every such eulogist of physical prowess Pindar is full of comfort:

Deeds without danger wrought
Neither in hollowed ships nor among men
Are honored; but if aught
Of glory be through peril sought,
Many remember then.

But there was another Greek trait, to which we as yet can lay little claim. With their intense enjoyment of life, their admiration for the beauty of manly vigor and its earthly environment, there was a widespread desire to reproduce, to eternalize, that fleeting loveliness. When we see the delicate beauty of the mere handworker's output, not of carven gem or inlaid sword alone, but even of the earthen pot, or hewn stone from the city wall, we say in our haste that all men in Hellas were lovers of beauty, even artists. And at least ugliness, or heavy-handed crudeness in any craft, was a thing to be ridiculed, detested, thrust mercilessly out of sight. Even the personal defects of Thersites are held up to scorn, along with his rash tongue and helpless hands.

Above all, the youthful male figure, quite undraped, seemed to the Greeks a thing supremely beautiful. Many a living sculptor to-day will perhaps say, in quiet, personal chat, al-

most the same. Even our youths adore the bulging muscles of the manly athlete, and look on with supercilious amusement while the girls play basket-ball. Behind the Greeks lay neither Christian teachings of equality nor any traditions of chivalry. Woman was to them an inferior, indispensable indeed, but only as the bearer of the man child. The wife was not even a sharer in the lighter diversions of men. To the banquet came only the despised flute players and dancing girls, the playthings and the property of men. The true social club was the gymnasium, or youths' palestra, and here nothing feminine appeared at all.

In Sparta, indeed, perhaps in Dorian lands generally, women had a larger share in athletic training, apparently also greater social freedom and personal power. But the Dorians are the negative, the heavier, as it were the Roman side of the Hellenic stock. Their contribution to the lasting and stable life of their race may have been very large; their visible share in the peculiar Greek genius and its gifts to us is certainly small. In any case, our knowledge in this direction is slight and fragmentary.

Most of what has been said here of the Greek nature is alike true of the epic ideals and of actual Ionic life in the fifth century B.C. In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, however, the women, at least royal princesses, almost the only women whom we meet in the Homeric world, seem quite free and independent.

In the *Iliad*, again, Greek art is in its infancy. But when, early in the fifth century B.C., the poets Pindar, Bacchylides, and Aischylos appear on the scene, Greek sculpture and architecture are already marching rapidly toward the triumphs of Phidias and his successors. Doubtless pillared temples, wayside shrines, glimmering statues, already dotted each dale and hillside of Hellas.

Though the trophy given officially at the time of victory to a winner in the games had usually no material value, yet from his townsfolk almost any prize or privilege was too little for him who had done such honor to his native city. Against these excessive rewards for merely physical superiority a philosopher, or even a poet, sometimes raised a bold

protest. Yet the overwhelming sentiment disregarded such isolated voices.

The ways of Olympia, which preserved for us our one ancient masterpiece of sculpture, Praxiteles's Hermes and infant Bacchos, were once lined and thronged with statues of athletes who had been victorious in the quadrennial games. Shrines, temples, and monuments of every kind were erected in the same spirit of eager thankfulness. As to painting, we have less knowledge. It may have been still the handmaid of its two sister arts. Hymns to the helpful gods, which were no less tributes to the prowess of the champion, with text, instrumental and vocal music, composed by the greatest masters of the art, resounded along the stadion and in the close of Zeus's great temple, before the victor's train began their jubilant homeward return. That journey was one long triumphal procession, often shared by the artists of every guild, who were to create equally precious memorials in the happy home city.

We cannot wonder that, under such conditions, the venerable and divinely ordained Olympic games were accounted the greatest stimulus to national Hellenic feeling. Hither the freeborn Greek could come for the contest from any corner of the Mediterranean world. Zeus, the supreme deity of the Hellenes, was the chief guardian of the holy place. A Truce of God suspended every public war or private feud for the time. All forms of trade, as of culture, found here a center and an exchange. Even the legend that Herodotos brought his history hither is not incredible, though he could not have read in public a tithe of the long roll. All men came to Olympia as pious pilgrims to Zeus's shrine. So the games held in the valley of Crisa, under the brow of Delphi, were a most essential and acceptable part of the Apollo-cult. In both places the Dorian influence, especially that of Sparta, was persistent, but nowise absolute.

The early decades of the fifth century were above any other epoch a time of proud national consciousness and of unbounded expectancy. The defeat of Xerxes's invading millions, gathered from all Asia, was felt to be a miracle,

proving that the Greeks were the chosen people of their gods. During that unequal struggle the chief rivals, Athens and Sparta, had worked hand in hand. The jealousy between them, destined to convulse and enfeeble all Hellas, and to make the century infinitely tragical in its close, was hardly felt. Apparently the danger was fully realized by no one in Pindar's day, unless, perhaps, the far-sighted Themistocles. Upon the monumental tripod set up at Delphi, after the victory of Plataia, and still to be seen where Constantine placed it to decorate his capital, twenty-nine other States are recorded as sharers with Sparta and Athens in the glorious strife. The Sicilian tyrants, even, had offered their services, though on impossible terms of supreme command. Furthermore, in the same campaign, if not, as tradition declared, on the same day, the united forces of the Western Greeks had gained in Sicily a decisive victory over a mighty host of Carthaginian invaders, so that Greek national life, and freedom from Persian or Phœnician despotism, were assured at once in the Eastward Ægean and in the lovely Hesperian island.

Lasting peace, indeed, or true national union, was destined never to be attained. Dorian, and especially Corinthian, jealousy of Athens's swift rise may have been active from the first. Yet to-day men forget their warmest political and religious differences in public worship, in the centers of trade, in the enjoyment of grand opera or Shakespearean drama, in the fraternal reunion of a college commencement. To a Greek such occasions as the Olympic or Pythian games were in some sense all these, fused in an enthusiasm which our calmer natures rarely show.

It is probably no accident then, nor even wholly regrettable, that Pindar is for us the poet of eighty epinikian odes *i. e.*, songs for athletic victors—and almost nothing more.

II.

We have been taught, chiefly by the unneighborly Athenians, and possibly, too, by querulous Hesiod, to regard the Bœotians as sluggish boors, dwelling under a sullen sky.

Indeed it is only twice in the story of Hellas that their genial and fertile land, well beloved in later days by gentle Plutarch, becomes the center of Greek life. The lyre of Pindar has perhaps left a more lasting impress than the sword of Epaminondas.

One powerful chord the poet must feel within him that he may strike it in others—the love of home. When he himself, or his song, had grown a thrice-welcome guest at every ruler's hearth, and in every free city of Grecian speech, Pindar asserted:

Not an alien unfamiliar with the Muses
I in famous Thebes was bred.

His exact birthplace was the suburban hamlet of Kynoskephalai. His local attachment matched Sophocles's love for Colonos and for Athens. The seven-gated city of the Oidipus-myth, the tales of the two founders, Amphion and Cadmos, the storied fount of Dirke, all gain new glory from Pindar's verse.

For cramming into an opening stanza in a youthful hymn allusions to a dozen such mythic memories, Pindar was wittily admonished by his teacher and successful rival, the poetess Corinna: "We should sow with the hand, and not with the whole sack." For the various arts which were united in his high public function he had as teachers the best masters of the time. Even a Pindar must have other instructions than Nature's. Among his less successful rivals was another Bœotian lady, whom Corinna chides with charmingly feminine inconsistency:

Myrtis still by me is censured,
Though her song is clear and sweet,
That, a woman born, she ventured
Against Pindar to compete.

We get an impression that Pindar's was but one of many musical voices in the Theban land. Certainly his genius was at once appreciated. He was barely twenty when a Thessalian boy named Hippocleas, of very noble parentage, won the quarter-mile race in the quadrennial games by Delphi. The Aleuadai, tyrants of Larisa, and perhaps this lad's kinsmen, ordered to be composed and sung in his honor a "hymn" or

ode, which is now preserved as the tenth Pythian ode of Pindar. Thus was struck the keynote of a full and glorious career, sixty years long.

Refusing to attach himself permanently to any tyrant's court, however splendid, Pindar maintained his Theban citizenship and professional independence. A haughty aristocrat, he felt fully the duty *noblesse oblige*. Thus to Hiero, of Syracuse, the mightiest Greek ruler of his day, Pindar speaks almost as an equal, not without a covert warning against overweening pride:

Men in various paths are great;
By kings the crest supreme is won; look not beyond.
Be thine aloft to tread thy space of time,
Mine ever with the victors to commune,
Myself among Hellenes everywhere
For skill in song illustrious.

As we should expect, he appears to have attended frequently the great games, especially at Olympia and at neighboring Delphi. Though the phrases used in his poetry must often refer to the song only, and not to the singer, yet he probably did visit freely also the homes of his patrons, such as the Sicilian capitals, Syracuse and Acragas, the lovely isle of Rhodes in the Ægean, even remote Kyrene on the African coast. Certainly the glimpses accorded us by him, at these and many other famous and beautiful cities of the Hellenic world, give the impression of keen eyesight and personal familiarity.

Doubtless wealthy by birth, there was hardly a limit to the rewards he could exact as the price of song-given fame. Long after his death, at the special feast of Theoxenia (Hospitality) at Delphi, the sacred herald used to proclaim: "Let Pindar pass in to the banquet of the god!" Among the artist's patrons was an Alexander, king of Macedon. Much later, in evil days, when a greater namesake of that monarch sacked contumacious Thebes, he still "bid spare the house of Pindarus."

Such a life, in such an age and folk, seems peculiarly full and happy. Yet there lay across it one black shadow, which perhaps was never wholly lifted.

When the Athenians marched out to meet and repel Darius's Persians at Marathon, no allies crossed their northwest frontier to aid them, save a thousand shields from brave little Plataia, ever threatened by imperious Thebes, and often dependent on Attic protection. Again, a decade later, from the list of patriotic States inscribed upon the Delphic tripod Thebes is dishonorably absent. Misled by jealous hatred for Athenian democracy, hopeless, no doubt, of successful resistance on the Grecian side, the Cadmean oligarchy had drawn their city over into Xerxes's alliance, though many exiles and fugitives of Theban birth probably fought under Pausanias's standard.

Even Pindar appears to have quailed in that supreme crisis, and prayed only that man or god might arise

To hold in check the common folk,
And seek the shining face of glorious Peace.

Polybios censures austere this weakness of our poet. Yet he was prompt, at least, with his greeting to the protagonist of Hellenism triumphant:

O violet-garlanded, resplendent, song-renowned,
Bulwark of Hellas, O illustrious Athens!

Attic local pride reëchoed that strain for centuries. The fine imposed by narrow-hearted Thebes upon her far-sighted poet—the larger recompense from Athens, in gold, an honorary citizenship, even in a statue of bronze—may be in part a growth of later legend. At least, the words of the seventh Isthmian throb with the bitterness of the poet's grief amid the nation's joy.

Sorrow my spirit fills,
Now bidden on the golden Muse to call.
Yet, freed of mighty ills,
Let us not into crownless desolation fall,
Nor nurse our grief;
But having eased us of evils desperate,
We to the folk will proffer sweet relief
Of song, after their bitter toil of late.
Because the stone of Tantalos that o'er us lay,
To Hellas an intolerable curse,
Some god hath turned away.

Yet these words, uttered when Thebes herself was most abased, are the unmistakable voice of a truly national poet. From him we would wish to have a song of deliverance, exultant as Miriam's over the drowned Egyptians. No wonder if something of envy mingled with his admiration of Aischylos, a lofty kindred spirit, across the mountain barrier which was so often fatal to the larger Hellenic patriotism.

To Pindar, then, even as the lyric artist, Fate has not, perhaps, been wholly kind. Of course there are victories, in war or peace, more worthy of poetic immortality than fleetness of foot, in hunt, race, or battle charge of horse or man. The ethical, the spiritual nature was nowise lacking in him, and had indeed been wondrously quickened, in the whole Attic and Hellenic folk of his generation, by that marvelous escape from the Median avalanche. But in the Epinikian odes these nobler sentiments are usually reduced to their lowest terms, appearing as brief, far-glancing apothegms. In such jewels of thought, two, three, or five words long, Pindar's poetry is probably richer than any other. But often they are evidently just the words which his audience of the moment least desired to hear. Not rarely they ring like bold warnings, even to the mightiest of men.

The myth, which had grown to be a traditional requirement in every such composition, is seemingly used at times in the same daring fashion. On the other hand, even Pindar's wings often droop, while he perforce renders a complete list of the prizes already won by the victor of the day and his kin.

Most frequently noted is Pindar's splendid imagery. Here his wealth of words enables him to use many times over a rather small number of familiar natural phenomena. The flash of lightning, of sunbeam, of star or of gold, the eagle's or the arrow's flight, with other impressions of swiftness and dazzling splendor, recur in every ode. This detail of his art can be studied with perfect accuracy and much profit, even in a prose translation. A notable accumulation of such metaphors fills the first stanza of the first Olympian—an ode which has evidently won its prominent position by its large treatment of the chief local myth, the tale of Pelops.

Water is best, and gold,
 Like fire by night that flames,
 Mid lordly wealth is eminent.
 But if of prizes thou
 Art fain, dear heart, to tell,
 Seek not another star
 More warming than the sun,
 Shining by day athwart the lonely air,
 Nor will we speak of greater than the Olympic games.

Pindar is less generally known than any other great Greek writer. We might almost say, as Voltaire did of Dante, that he will always be praised because never read. There are several authors of much greater influence on later literature, and in that sense more important. We are apt, also, to think of Attica as the soul of Greece, and Athenè's chief interpreter certainly was born amid the nightingales and olives of Colonos. But if we truly wish to know—not indeed the common life but—the ideal and artistic spirit of Hellas as a whole, in her happiest generation, no means save an intimate study of Pindar's odes will suffice.

It is not an easy nor a painless task. We move usually amid a throng of ghosts; we hear names which call no faces to our imagination. Each goodly palace and pillared temple has crumbled to ignoble ruin. The harmonies of the march and dance have died away forever. If they who love music best will imagine a student in New Zealand or Samoa, thousands of years hence, struggling with dictionary and notes to *read* a mere libretto text of our great operas or oratorios, it will be a fairly parallel case. And yet even so, Wagner, at least, would remain a true poet; Pindar is a much greater one.

A simple verse of some humbler singer, Catullus, Béranger, Heine, or Burns, may reach the source of tears more easily; but among the bards sublime, the masters of the loftiest style, Pindar has a unique position. We cannot afford to ignore the gift he offers us so confidently:

As he that with a lavish hand a cup doth lift
 Plashing with dew of grapes within,
 And proffers it, a gift,
 To him who newly to his child is wed:
 A pledge from home to home 'tis sped,
 All-golden, of his treasures the most choice,

Wherewith the banquet shall rejoice,
And honors so his kin,
Because the youth is made among his friends
Envied for marriage that such largess sends—
So I the outpoured nectar which the Muses gave,
Sweet fruitage of the poet's soul, my lay,
Sending to them that bear the prize away,
Honor the heroes brave,
Who at Olympia and Pytho win.

Much in Pindar needs annotation. As to many allusions, we must still remain in the dark. When he is really difficult, however, it is less often from any subtlety of thought than from his sudden shifts of figure and rapidity in general. As he puts it:

Under my bended arm
Many a missile fleet
Within my quiver lies.
Unto the wise they speak:
But to the multitude
They lack interpreters.

Here follow some winged words against a pair of rivals, very possibly the kindred poets Simonides and Bacchylides:

He is the master who by nature rightly knows.
They that from study learn their art to use,
A pair of quarreling crows,
Scream vainly at the bird divine of Zeus.

Clearly he expected the personal allusion to be understood—by some one. Else, why the dual?

Even in the midst of these Epinikians, Pindar, to all appearances, breaks away at times altogether from his allotted task. For instance, there is in the second Olympian a picture of the next world, deeply tinged with Pythagorean mysticism, which deserves a whole volume of interpretation and comment.

In general, Pindar takes a bold, though reverent, stand against any mythic tale of evil-doing or ignoble motive in the divine beings. Of course this often compelled him to recast, or even reverse, statements sanctioned by Hesiod and other epic authority. This must be regarded as evidence of a noble and truly religious nature. But Pindar does not, like Aischylos, offer us any large theological scheme or faith of

his own. He is shocked, as we are, when an ancient myth "calls one of the blessed gods a cannibal." From all such tales he holds aloof.

Perhaps of all missing rolls the *Hymns* of Pindar would enrich us most. Yet it was doubtless no accident, but the deliberate choice of his own and later ages, that preserved, out of seventeen books, only the four of Epinikian odes. Even so, he is the unquestioned master among all Greek lyrists, probably the greatest example of dazzling verbal splendor in the whole tale of European literature: but this wealth is chiefly devoted to the glorification of physical prowess.

WILLIAM CRANSTON LAWTON.